promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which ere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

r 153 May, 1950

GOD'S GARDEN SPOT

HOLBROOK LIBRARY PACIFIC SCHOOL OF RELIGION

By Ralph W. Sockman*

When we put down the daily paper on a typical morning, we are prone to depressed. The power of the Kremlin seems to be casting an ever-lengthening adow across the world. The Orient appears to be disintegrating into an increasgly dangerous condition. Western Europe is so divided that help is difficult. r own capital echoes with cries of accusation and alarm. On every side are the gns of cold war with fears of future hot conflict.

But on these May mornings we also see another aspect of God's world. In is northern hemisphere the earth is bursting with the life-giving forces of spring. auty is covering the scars of winter. Nature puts away the hooded cloak of coldss and dons the mantle of grace.

And amid this general beautification of nature, which is to be seen in ery hedgerow and forest, there are dotted gardens where man is co-worker with God the creation of loveliness. In these gardens the hard earth is mellowed into ft beds where seeds are laid, there to leave their shells and rise into rich cols and graceful forms. When we stop to ponder it, the mystery of growth as seen gardens restores the soul and renews a right spirit within us.

What the garden is to nature, the home is to human nature. It is the spot ere the soil is prepared for life, where the seeds of life take root, and where e roots of life grow into the fruits of the spirit. And on this Mother's Day I nt to look with you at God's garden spot, the home.

Back in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, the eighth verse, we read of Abram, e first of the Hebrew patriarchs, these words: "And he pitched his tent. . .and ilded an altar. . .and called upon the name of the Lord." In the very beginning Hebrew history the home is linked with God. This union of family life and relious faith is the bond which helped to hold the Hebrew people together during their slavement in Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, their exile in Babylon, and eir persecution in the centuries since.

Dr. Ralph W. Sockman is pastor of Christ Church Methodist, Park Avenue and 60th reet, New York, N. Y. "God's Garden Spot" is a sermon preached over the "National dio Pulpit," Sunday, May 14, 1950. Grateful acknowledgement is made to Dr. Sockn for permission to share this message with the members of The Christian Rural llowship.

And the history of the Christian faith attests the same dependence on the home as the center of religious culture. In the Book of Acts we read of the early Christians: "Not for a single day did they cease to teach and preach the gospel of Jesus the Christ in the temple and at home." Yes, the home is God's garden spot.

First of all, the home is the garden where the soil is prepared for life. When we hear an adult say, "The world owes me a living," we deny his doctrine. The world does not owe a living to drones. But it does to infants. The child is brought into the world not at its own behest, and the parent who does not assume responsibility for the care of his child, we rightly call inhuman.

No infant could survive more than a few hours unless the soil was prepared for its start. The very elements which make for a child's growth have to be adjusted to it or they would destroy it. The sunlight must be filtered in the right degree lest it impair the vision of the infant's opening eyes. The little one must be guided to its food lest it starve or poison itself. Without a specially prepared soil, the tender plant of childhood would quickly perish.

And we grown-ups, if we are to have a life worth living, must have some garden spots where the soil is more congenial than the hard street. We need some places where we can get away from the curious, unfeeling stare of the crowd and look into eyes that understand and sympathize. We need some circle where we can unpack our hearts with words and where listening love sifts the wheat from the chaff of our chatter and goes on caring for us in spite of our weaknesses. We need those home spots where we can get away from the cutting edge of competition and allow our better natures to be brought out by cooperation and compassion.

Not all of us find congenial mates and make homes through marriage. But few of us are so alone that we do not have some ties with the homes of our childhood, our relatives, or our friends. And how bravely some persons who live alone make their rooms into homey places by surrounding themselves with tokens and objects of affection. We adults never outgrow the need and longing for a home.

Granted all this, what does religion add to the soil of a home? Recently I saw a chart showing that homes in which the members had no church affiliation had almost three times as high a divorce rate as those whose members belonged to some church. God puts into the soil of the home certain fertilizing elements.

For instance, true godliness transforms the possessiveness of love into a sense of trusteeship. So often we become selfishly possessive of our husbands or wives or children. That attitude makes for jealousy and bitterness. Was it not Professor George Herbert Palmer who said of his wife Alice Freeman: "I never called her mine." He loved her deeply but he avoided treating her as his possession. Rather he sought to be the trustee of her interests, ever with an eye to her welfare. Such is the kind of love godliness engenders in a home.

Also God develops the grace of forgiveness. Into every home misunderstandings come. There are times when our affections freeze up because of some change in the family weather. But when we let in the sunlight of God's presence, the icicled springs of the heart thaw out and, oh, what fun it is to "make up."

God replenishes the supply of grace which is needed to lubricate the wheels of the home, for even affection can develop friction through intimate contact. But a truly godly home is a place of gracious hospitality, a place where mothers make it

leasant for their daughters' friends, where boys like to bring their buddies, where n short there are the things which are nice "to come home to."

In my youth I was greatly moved by Charles Rann Kennedy's drama, "The Servnt in the House." The humble workman who came to fix the drain in the church was he embodiment of the Nazarene Master. And he transformed the whole household from place of lifeless self-centeredness to a place of gracious and radiant living. nd I remember, too, that the home to which this wonder-working Servant came was the ome of a clergyman, for we ministers who handle the sacraments of the church and he most sacred moments of human life need the ever-renewing consciousness of God to eep us sensitive to the mystery of a new baby, the beauty of baptism, the romance f marriage, and the sorrow of bereavement.

Yes, both as infants and adults we need the garden spots of God where the oil is specially prepared for living.

Secondly, the home is God's garden spot where the seeds of life take root. o early does this process of sowing begin in childhood that Horace Bushnell, one of he most formative preachers America has produced, declared: "Let every Christian ather and mother understand, when their child is three years old, that they have one more than half of all they will ever do for his character."

That may seem hard to believe. But the magic spell of a good and happy ome begins to work on a little heart long before the age of conscious memory. That s why a certain young mother began to pray aloud with her baby almost immediately fter it was born.

In those early impressionable years a child absorbs attitudes. And in ur changing world attitudes are more important than skills. The skills we learn oday may be outmoded twenty years hence. The automobiles of 1980 may be driven by tomic energy and our skill in driving the present motors may not be adequate for he new day, although I must confess some of our youth seem to be driving by atomic nergy even now! But while skills may become useless, good attitudes do not. The hild that catches a positive, courageous, hopeful attitude toward life will be lessed thereby to the end of his days.

Ideas as well as attitudes take root. When a child asks, "Mother, if I adn't been your little girl, who would I have been?" she is opening her mind to deas about the meaning and worth of being a person. A prominent minister, with a arge family whose members have been born in various places where he has served, was xplaining to his youngest child that one brother was born in Oregon, one sister in hio, another in New York, and so on. Whereupon the little girl said, "Daddy, isn't t funny how we all came to get together?" She was getting at the secret of the amily. And the little boy who asked, "How can God think of me when there are so any things for him to do in the world?" was beginning to face the inexhaustible uestion of our Heavenly Father's care.

And when a child asks his mother about God and life, she cannot put him ff by saying, "I'll look it up in the encyclopedia." No encyclopedia can be a subtitute for a parent's spiritual experience. Out of the heart must come the issues nd the answers of life to life.

Moreover, the answers to these questions take root according to the child's xperience. How can you explain to a little fellow the trustworthy love of a Heaven-

ly Father if he has never known the love of an earthly parent whom he can trust?

Not only do the seeds of attitudes and ideas take root in the earliest childhood, but values as well. If at the family table the talk is all about gettin a new car or new clothes or new furnishings, the child gets the impression that the most important interests of life are material things. He may hear at the church that we must put God first, but he knows that in his home things come first.

There are some things which our forefathers made in their homes but which we now buy outside. Once women spun the flax on the family spinning wheel. Now we get our clothes made outside. There is one thing, however, which cannot be produce as well outside the home and that is religious faith.

Bobby Burns beheld the cotter in his humble home on a Saturday night with the children around him and the Bible before him and he wrote:

"From scenes like this old Scotia's grandeur springs
Which makes her loved at home, revered abroad."

And if the simple old home had such potency, the modern home can have immeasurably more, for into our family circles can be brought now the world's best music and the world's news. With this as material for conversation and enjoyment, the home life can be enriched and social outlook on races and nations can be widened.

Ah yes, with all respect to the good old-fashioned homes, the homes of today with their better housing, their longer leisure, their wider insights, can be made richer gardens of God than our grandfathers enjoyed.

And now let us remember that the home is the garden of God where not only the soil is prepared for life and the seeds of life take root, but also the roots grow into the fruits of the spirit.

A marriage is not necessarily good merely because it lasts. We have know homes which never went to the divorce courts and yet were so drab in their love lif that daughters became utterly disillusioned about marriage. We talk about "making love" as if it were something that takes place before marriage. The real test of love-making comes after we have won our mates. The heartiest congratulations are due to the two persons who can take one marriage and make it into a rich and growing experience.

Two weeks ago today as a couple left the door of my church, the wife said "We are going to California to celebrate our sixtieth wedding anniversary. We hope to celebrate our seventy-fifth anniversary in heaven." They seemed to imply that California was the last stage before heaven, and I rather agree. I happen to have known that couple through many years. Two richly endowed minds have shared each other's interests, have blended their somewhat different tastes in the enjoyment of similar pleasures, have traveled, worked, played together, until their love has ripened into something exquisitely beautiful. A love that vaunteth not itself, seeketh not its own, is not easily provoked, a love that beareth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Such love is the result of cultivation. Love, like a garden, must be tended. Recently I read a list of ten suggestions for enriching home life. Among

em were such things as having fun together, developing common interests, celebrat-
g special days, singing together -- simple homely things, yes, but it is little
mely things that make homes richer. Some homes have a family council in which the
rents and children, especially from twelve years up, plan together their programs
expenditures and amusements. Thus the family becomes a partnership of free minds
which the experiences of the elders supplement the experiments of the younger.

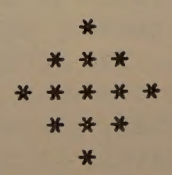
And, of course, in the list of suggestions for bettering the home was that
worshiping together and also sacrificing together. When sister Mary gives up
mething so that John can finish high school, a bond is strengthened into the home.
d when all make some sacrifice for God's work through the church or mission field,
e family is not impoverished but greatly enriched.

Beautiful, isn't it, to see the roots of family training bearing fruits in
e lives of men when they have reached places of leadership later in life. Dr.
drew Blackwood of Princeton quotes from a letter of Grover Cleveland written just
ter he left the White House. He speaks of his successor William McKinley. Listen
one president speaking about another:

"I have had a long talk with President McKinley. He is an honest, sincere,
d serious man. I feel that he is going to do his best to give the country a good
ministration. I envied him today only one thing, the presence of his mother at
e inauguration."

The home is God's garden spot, and so long as we are willing to be workers
gether with God in cultivating the soil of love, sowing the seeds of life, and
ising the fruits of the spirit, our homes give ground for hope in a better and
aver world.

AYER: Eternal God, who committest to us the swift and solemn trust of life, teach
to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. We beseech Thee for
l who are near and dear to us; for little children that they may grow in grace and
odness; for the aged that they may have clear shining at eventide; for men busy
th the affairs of life and women burdened with household cares, that the peace of
d may fill their hearts and minds. We praise Thee this day for mother love which
s blessed the earth with the best gifts of life, and we pray that all the mothers
men may reap the harvest of their labors in lives made better and a world made
re brotherly. Guard the families of our land and guide us into the family of nations
at we may be worthy to enter Thy eternal home: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



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